

Council-Manager Relations: Time for Adjustment, Before It Is Too Late

This spring, I spoke to administrators, elected officials, and academicians at a conference on the Cleveland State University campus. The purpose of the conference, which was titled "Governing Local America—Maximizing Responsiveness and Efficiency," was to explore the council-manager form of government, focusing on elected officials' expectations of the changing role of the professional administrator, as well as to address council-administrator relationships. The conference also called public attention to the role that professional local government managers can play in strengthening local government and local democracy.

The conference presentation was based on my 20 years of experience as a local government manager and my five years as an executive search consultant to local government. It centered on council expectations and how these expectations have changed over the years, council-manager relationships, and what administrators need to do to strengthen them.

What Has Changed and What Remains the Same

As I began my research for the presentation, I found position profiles from the past 15 years—from the late 1970s and late 1980s—which I compared with 1993 profiles. I divided the profiles into two categories: council's expectations in terms of organizational skills and council's expectations in terms of management and personality style. This is what I found.

A 15-Year

Look at

Council

Expectations

Jim Brimeyer

Ten years ago. Elected officials looked for experience in economic development and bonding issues, in union relations, and in the maintenance of stable employment; plus skills in grantsmanship. In management style, they looked for a certain level of maturity; a low profile; diplomatic skills; an aura of authority; the ability to handle a variety of issues; a steady career path; and skill in working with the governing body so as to form a single unit.

In 1988. Councilmembers sought managers who knew how to protect neighborhoods and mitigate traffic; to negotiate labor contracts; to respond with sensitivity to environmental issues—particularly recycling; to assist the governing body and staff in goal setting; to deal familiarly with the issues of data processing and cable TV; and to retain a strong customer service orientation. In the areas of management and style, the important qualifications were persuasive skills; a high level of energy; the ability to manage people and processes; sensitivity to political realities; a good sense of employee relations; and skill in conflict resolution.

In 1993. Now, elected officials are looking for managers who are visionary; oriented toward staff development; possessed of highly developed collaboration skills; experienced at financial management; skilled in providing leisure activities; and experienced in development and redevelopment. On the management side, applicants should have a long-range vision; know how to share leadership roles and empower staff; look at the governing body and staff as a team; encourage citizen participation; develop partnerships; resolve conflicts ably; be highly sensitive to diversity and to gender and sexual harassment; and possess a sound ethical/value system.

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their necks out” and take a leadership role without taking all the credit for getting things done. The old axiom “make councils look good, no matter what they do” still is in effect. Today’s elected officials are reluctant to provide the political leadership necessary to get the job done; they look to their CEO to provide it. Elected officials no longer seem willing to lead—especially on social issues, citizen participation, use of volunteers, and matters involving the changing workforce in a changing society. They expect the manager to understand and take the helm—to bring information to them and to guide them (yes, even help them) in making decisions about what to do.

Similarly, on the management side, local government staff members still want a strong leader in their CEO but they also want to participate in the process. The hierarchical structure no longer exists. Total quality management, effective teamwork, and short-term task forces are the order of the day when getting a job done.

Management in the '90s

Basic tools are needed by the effective manager in the 1990s. These

tools include economic development and redevelopment; effective and meaningful employee evaluation; “rightsizing” of the organization, including the combination of services and resource reallocation; leadership without politics; more intellectual and creative approaches to problem solving; openness to elected officials’ greater participation in management; a stronger orientation toward process—especially with the public and staff; a greater accessibility to individual elected leaders, sometimes to the point of coaching them; and skill in anticipating what will happen in a global environment, so that consortiums of cities and regions can be set up.

Managers need to be more sensitive to the personalities of individual elected officials, the gamesmanship of politics, and the fact that politics is no longer a businessman’s avocation (the “boomers” and “yuppies” are getting elected as careerists, and value systems are changing). Most importantly, managers must understand the necessity of maintaining one-on-one relationships and of treating the governing body as a unit. Because of this changing environment, much more tension will arise. Managers should not take criticism personally; they should always assume it is political posturing (it probably is). No demand or request should be considered excessive because it probably is important to the individual making it, either for a personal or a political reason.

Finally, there seems to be an unusual amount of outrage in the air over manager dismissal. One of the aspects of the council-manager relationship is the right of a governing body to change the administrator, should it so choose. Managers always complain of being surprised, unaware of elected officials’ dissatisfaction. Managers must stay closely attuned to councilmembers’ needs, both individually and as a group, to avoid being caught unaware.

What Can Be Done

First of all, we need to have stronger managers and stronger elected officials, particularly at the mayoral level. The term "PoliAd" (political administrator) represents the era in which we are operating, wherein the mayor and the manager must form a team and assume responsibility in assisting the community through its many decision-making and problem-solving processes. Managers can aid mayors and other elected officials by helping them develop a sense of governance; it is even better if political leaders also can get this message from other elected officials. Managers can help all of these officials develop "rules" for their behavior.

Today, managers must be prepared to make more adjustments than they can expect of elected officials. They need to have a vision, an inspiration, and the ability to get the

team to buy into it. They must develop a sense of teamwork and manage the strengths and egos of each team member; manage circumstances and recognize changes in economy, technology, and competitiveness; take personal responsibility for decisions made under fire; and be adept at conflict resolution, particularly when reallocating resources. Managers must be willing to commit and "uncommit"—there are windows of opportunity of which they must take advantage. It is necessary to push the idea of performance evaluation and the issues of role definition and role efficiency. This is important, not just for the manager but also for individual elected leaders. Administrators have to take 51 percent of the responsibility for accommodating the needs of the governing body, as a whole and as individuals.

Managers need to "forget the potholes" and lead firmly in developing

a strategic plan and a sense of strategic thinking. They need to recognize that the only constant aspect of their job is change—and that it also is their job to manage the change. To accomplish this, I suggest that in addition to the regular master's-degree program, managers should be trained in the areas of conflict resolution and salesmanship, and become completely knowledgeable in the principles of total quality management.

It is an exciting time to be a manager. While some of the old rules still apply, much has altered in the last 10 to 15 years. I anticipate that the changes will not be quite so dramatic in the next 10 years. But they will prove traumatic for those managers who fail to recognize that their environment is changing. **PM**

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